

BOOK REVIEW

Christopher Prendergast, *Counterfactuals:  
Paths of the Might Have Been*

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As author Christopher Prendergast acknowledges, *Counterfactuals: Paths of the Might have Been* does not attempt to offer a theory of counterfactuals, nor does it develop a contribution to an existing theory (p. 10). Instead, it is as the author puts it an “anthropology of the counterfactual” (p. 4). However, it is nothing as systematic as that. It is not a survey, but a series of “listening exercises” (p. 4) which roam over literature, history, art, philosophy, music, and popular culture. He admits that this exercise of collecting counterfactuals is “quirky business” akin “wool gathering” and “purposeless daydreaming” (p. 23). However, Prendergast does have some aims in *Counterfactuals*. He claims that he wants to show the variety of counterfactuals, how they are used, and how they resonate in human experience (p. 3). If the book aims to support an overarching conclusion, it is probably this: “What we do with counterfactuals and what they do to us are integral to making sense of humanity” (p. 6).

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However, it is not always clear what Prendergast takes counterfactuals to be. He distinguishes them from falsehoods or alternative facts (p. 6), so they are not merely statements that are contrary to fact. For the most part, he uses the term “counterfactuals” as shorthand for “counterfactual conditionals,” which have many true instances. He writes that the “theoretical scaffolding” of a counterfactual is “undergirded” by an “if x, then y” sentence type (p. 11). While counterfactuals permit syntactical and grammatical variation, the *protasis-apodosis* (antecedent-consequent) structure is said to the schematic form of all counterfactual statements and propositions (p. 11). According to Prendergast, counterfactuals are “special combination of conditional and subjunctive elements” (p. 16). (Indeed, they are also known as “subjunctive conditionals.” For a philosophical overview of counterfactual conditionals see Starr, William, “Counterfactuals”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = < <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/counterfactuals/> >. See Section 1.1 for a discussion of the expression “subjunctive conditional.”) Prendergast suggests that sometimes people who employ counterfactuals have a preference for ‘would have’ conditionals, claiming that “the deductive logic of truth-conditional semantics” is one of the very few domains of inquiry in which “one can enter a ‘would-have’ counterfactual claim with justification” (p. 17).

Such confusing remarks may result from the fact that Prendergast does not distinguish counterfactual conditionals from material conditionals. As most students of philosophy know, it is material conditionals that typically have an ‘if P, then Q’ structure, and are truth functional, which means that their truth-values are a function of the truth-values of the antecedent and the consequent. Consequently, we have the familiar truth-table for ‘if P, then Q’ which has determinate truth values for the four possible combinations of truth-values for ‘P’ and ‘Q’. Counterfactuals, on the other hand, are best expressed by an ‘If P had been the case, then Q would have been the case’ structure, and are *not* truth functional. Assessing the truth-values of counterfactuals is a more complex and speculative process which motivates the development of possible-worlds semantics. Rather than considering the actual truth-values of ‘P’ and ‘Q’, one considers a possible situation in which ‘P’ is true which is as similar as possible to actuality, and then determines if ‘Q’ would be true in that situation as well. Metaphorically, one goes to the closest possible world in which ‘P’ is true and sees if ‘Q’ is true there. (See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).) While some of these elements of modal logic are mentioned in Prendergast’s *Counterfactuals*, they are not clearly explained.

Prendergast also makes assumptions about counterfactuals that are neither standard in the literature, nor consistently maintained in his text. He claims that all counterfactuals have antecedents which are about something which occurred prior to the state of affairs described by the consequent (p. 12). In Prendergast's parlance, "the temporal cartwheel of the counterfactual, flipping between the 'before' and the 'after', mixes elements of forecast and retrospect in a manner that disconcerts but that can also illuminate" (p. 15). He also suggests that the antecedent of every counterfactual is false (p. 15). While counterfactuals which meet those conditions are the focus of this monograph, no such limitations are recognized in standard modal logic. In fact, Prendergast himself highlights what he calls a "gracefully demented specimen" of a counterfactual which he claims to have heard in a philosophy seminar: "If Canberra were the capital of Australia, the moon would have had craters" (p. 25). Prendergast remarks that this counterfactual "teaches you a lot once you have recovered from the shock" (p. 25), but it is not clear what the lesson is supposed to be, if not that a subjunctive conditional can have a true antecedent that is not temporally prior to its consequent.

Given the author's introduction, you might think that the book would go on to offer examples of counterfactuals, but you would only be partially correct. Instead, most of these "listening exercises" merely describe contexts in which it would be appropriate to assert a counterfactual conditional. While the author notes that some counterfactuals are "implicit" (p. 28), surmising which counterfactual is implied sometimes requires a bit of charitable reading, if not mindreading. An example that the author returns to repeatedly is "the might-have-been that irrupts into the cinematic banality appropriately titled *La La Land*" (p. 2). Not having seen the film, I had no idea what implicit counterfactual he had in mind. So I watched it. (Research!) Indeed, the film contains a dream sequence of a past that differs from the events depicted earlier in the movie. But given the multitude of causally unrelated events depicted in that wordless montage, I still do not know what counterfactual conditional or conditionals Prendergast might have been referring to. He praises a different film, *Brief Encounter*, for its "poignant counterfactual encounter" (p. 2), which sounds like an encounter that did not actually happen. I haven't seen that film yet, so I don't know which counterfactual conditional is supposed to be implicit in that reference. However, if one enjoys such cinematic exploration of counterfactual possibilities, I can also recommend *Run Lola Run*.

One of Prendergast's favorite examples of a counterfactual is attributed to Kafka: "It is conceivable that Alexander the Great ... might have remained on the bank of the Hellespont and never have crossed it..." (p. 24). Of course,

conceiving of something that did not happen is to conceive of something that is contrary to fact. But since counterfactuals are distinguished from falsehoods and alternative facts, conceiving of something that did not happen is not tantamount to conceiving of a counterfactual conditional. Though the antecedent must surely be ‘If Alexander the Great had not crossed the Hellespont...,’ but it is not clear what the consequent of this “implicit” counterfactual is supposed to be. Another example said to be a “justificatory counterfactual” is actually a question: “how... would an alternative decision have affected US relations with strategically important countries...?” (p. 34). (Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger: 1923-1968: The Idealist*, London, 2015, p. vi.) I suppose that it would be appropriate to answer this question with a counterfactual, but again it is not clear what that counterfactual would be. Similarly, the questions “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and “what would a possible world look like if it had nothing in it?” (p. 2) provides contexts for asserting a counterfactual conditional, at best. But one of Prendergast’s favorite examples of a counterfactual is indeed a counterfactual conditional, and it is one that truly resonates: “If I had written a book about counterfactuals, I wouldn’t have done it this way” (p. 26).

The book catalogs numerous uses and roles that counterfactuals play in our lives. We use them to test causal explanations and conduct thought experiments. They provide avenues for pursuing curiosity and wonder. They are a source of consolation for the defeated. (If only had drawn the Ace, I would have won the game.) Contemplating counterfactuals often follows from having unfulfilled desires. They are part of the way that we learn from our mistakes. They play a role in moral reasoning, especially when it comes to having a guilty conscience or experiencing regret.

Beyond the Introduction (discussed above) the book has seven chapters. The first three chapters are said to “lay some groundwork” for the four that follow (p. 6). The goal of Chapter 1 is “to distinguish between the vacuous and the non-vacuous” (p. 31). A vacuous counterfactual is not to be confused with a vacuously true counterfactual, such as one with an impossible antecedent. Instead, Prendergast’s vacuous counterfactuals are those that are “flagrantly pointless” (p. 31), “comically batty,” with an “analytic yield is somewhere south of zero” (p. 33). As an example of vacuity, Prendergast offers Robert Stalnaker’s illustration of the non-transitivity of counterfactuals:

1. If Hoover had been born a Russian, he would have been a communist.
2. If Hoover had been a communist, he would have been a traitor.
3. Therefore, if Hoover had been born a Russian, he would have been a traitor.

(Prendergast cites Lewis' discussion of Stalnaker's example in *Counterfactuals*, pp. 32-3.)

Premises (1) and (2) are plausible. However, the conclusion (3) seems false. This goes to show that (3) does not logically follow from (1) and (2). The lesson is, while the hypothetical syllogism is a valid argument form for material conditionals, it is not so for counterfactual conditionals.

However, this is not what Prendergast says. He recognizes that the argument is a conscious demonstration of faulty reasoning (p. 37). But, he says that the conclusion is self-contradictory (p. 40). He goes on to suggest that the problem with the argument is that it commits the fallacy of equivocation, whereby its middle term "communist" is used in two different ways. But finally, he claims that problems with argument derive primarily from the implausibility of the first premise (p. 40). He closes by calling Stalnaker's argument a "limitlessly silly" "taxing (and mildly hilarious) imbroglio of imploding predications," and an "intellectual fiasco" (p. 41) which he expects will leave readers "understandably somnolent" (p. 40). The author seems to regard analytic philosophy about counterfactuals as tiring, boring and silly, expecting readers to react to this discussion by laughing or falling asleep.

The other main example of an apparently silly counterfactual in this chapter is attributed to Blaise Pascal: "If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter the whole face of the earth would have changed" (p. 44; Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, (Philippe Sellier, ed., Paris, 2000), pp. 50-1). Rather than the counterfactual itself being absurd, it is said to be a philosophical reflection of the meaninglessness of human history.

Chapter 2 is about facts and their relation to counterfactuals. Not to be confused with alternative facts, counterfactuals are said to be hypothetical facts, "conceptually rooted in the ancient notion of a 'potential' that bears within it a power to become the actual (except that here the power is aborted and consigned to the realm of might-have-been)" (p. 50). Here, the author seems to assume the controversial view that potentialities are the truth-makers for counterfactuals. (For development of the view that counterfactuals and other modalities are grounded in potentialities, see Barbara Vetter, *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).) The chapter goes on about different translations of "fact" in other languages and expressions that include the term, the philosophical import of which is unclear.

Prendergast's reflection on the conservative nature of facts is an interesting part of this chapter. The author notes that facts constitute the background assumptions one makes while assessing counterfactuals. "Going to" the closest possible world in which the antecedent of a counterfactual is true means accepting a great many beliefs as facts, and taking them for granted

in the process of counterfactual speculation. This constrains speculation from getting too extreme, but it also means that what you think is possible is limited by your assumptions about what is actual. Furthermore, historical facts are ‘in the archive’ and are often taken to be not only fixed, but inevitable. Despite the aforementioned constraints on assessing counterfactuals, there is nevertheless another role for counterfactuals, and that is to challenge the apparent necessity of facts.

Chapter 3 discusses counterfactuals in reference to two paintings. The first is Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. Prendergast focuses on Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the painting, according to which the angel is looking back at tragic events in history. He quotes a passage of Benjamin which includes the sentence “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed” (p. 71; Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History, Illuminations*, London, 1992, p. 249). The implicit counterfactual conditional here might be ‘if the angel could change the past, he would.’ The other painting that the author considers is Titian’s *Allegory of Prudence* which features three animal faces and three human faces. The human faces include an elderly man on the left, a middle-aged man in the middle, and a young man on the right. This painting provides occasion for Prendergast to reflect on the passage of time, whereby the man in the center symbolizes someone in the present reflecting on the past and envisioning the future. What does this have to do with counterfactuals? As the author puts it, this situation is “very far from being a counterfactual-free zone” (p. 84).

Chapter 4 concerns crossroads and forks in the road, which are described as locations that are haunted “by counterfactual scenarios of the ways in which things might have gone” (p. 7). They are literally and metaphorically places where one can choose between different paths. Once one has proceeded along the path of one’s choice, one can always contemplate a counterfactual that begins ‘If I had chosen the other path, then...’ Prendergast could have mentioned Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” which concludes:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

(Frost, Robert. “The Road Not Taken.” *By Robert Frost: The Poetry Foundation*. The Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2013. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173536> ).

But of course, his survey is not exhaustive. Instead, the chapter follows three journeys, those of Oedipus, Petrarch, and Ignatius of Loyola.

In the story of Oedipus Rex, the characters endeavor to avoid the fate whereby Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, only to bring it about anyway. This story often prompts readers to wonder ‘what if the characters hadn’t heard the prophecy? Would the prophecy have still come true via a different route?’ The story fits the theme of crossroads, because when Oedipus travels from Delphi to Thebes, he kills a man that he meets at a crossroad, thus fulfilling the oracle’s prophecy that he kill his father. Presumably, the implicit counterfactual in Prendergast’s retelling is ‘Had Oedipus taken a different route, he would not have killed his father.’

Prendergast’s next case of a crossroad is more metaphorical, though it does involve travelling. When Petrarch climbs Mount Ventoux, he is carrying a copy of Augustine’s *Confessions* with him. He opens to a random page, and that page happens to describe an incident in which Augustine opens a random page of the Holy Bible. These randomly chosen passages held some meaning for these men that had some impact going forward. The implicit counterfactual in both cases must be something like ‘If he had turned to a different page, he would have read a different passage and his journey would have proceeded differently.’

In the third tale, Ignatius of Loyola is traveling on horseback when he meets a Muslim traveler who insults the Virgin Mary. He moves on, but contemplates turning around to find the man and kill him. He is indecisive, so he lets his horse have free reign at the next crossroad to settle the matter. The horse chooses the path that lets the man escape. One is left to imagine the counterfactuals which might be appropriate to assert in such a situation.

Chapter 5 is about regret. Some pages are spent locating the concept in other languages and cultures. The link between repentance and regret is discussed at length. This includes a discussion of Montaigne’s “On Repenting” (in Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, London, 1991). According to the Prendergast, Montaigne has “no time for counterfactuals.” Prendergast’s evidence for this is the following quotation from Montaigne: “If I had to live again, I would live as I have done” (p. 134). (The astute reader will notice that this quotation is a counterfactual conditional. This, along with the previous examples, strongly suggest that Prendergast is using “counterfactual” ambiguously, with his other usage being closer to “non-fact” than the author acknowledges.) Prendergast goes on to explore the idea that regret is a “counterfactual emotion” that is part of our “choice architecture” (p. 145). Quite plausibly, regretting one’s past action often involves a belief that better consequences would have resulted from a different action, though it is not obvious that this is necessarily the case. The chapter concludes with a discussion the regret of buyer’s remorse and the role of counterfactuals assessing liability in tort law (p. 148).

Chapters 6 and 7 are about counterfactuals that relate to personal identity and existence. Chapter 6 explores the way that certain decisions are life-shaping, making you who you are. Consequently, the counterfactual that begins ‘If I had made a different decision...’ might end up describing a situation in which the person who would result from that alternative decision would not be you. Prendergast also offers “the wish to have never been born” as an expression of a desire for state of affairs in which one does not exist. This preferred state of affairs presumably would be the consequent of the counterfactual conditional which begins ‘If had never been born, then...’ Chapter 7 focuses on Fernando Pessoa’s discussion of the multiplicity of the self. According to Pessoa, there are many possible selves in each individuals, but they cannot all be expressed. Defining a unitary self shuts down other possibilities. This creates the context for counterfactuals regarding the person that one could have been. Both of these chapters raise questions about the nature of the self and constitute the most philosophically interesting part of the book, in my opinion. This book ends after a Postscript to Chapter 7 without any general concluding remarks.

I don’t want to criticize this book for failing to be something that it was never intended to be. However, I actually don’t know who this book is for. Since it does little to advance the philosophy of counterfactuals, and since it is unclear (if not confused) about existing theory, I would not recommend it to anyone with philosophical interest in counterfactuals. Perhaps it is intended for non-philosophers? But as Prendergast notes, the expression “counterfactual conditional” was invented in 1947 by analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman (p. 10), and it remains a piece of philosophical jargon with little currency outside of relatively small academic circles. So it is not clear to me why anyone who is not philosophically interested in counterfactuals would be interested in them at all.

However, I’d be happy to be proven wrong. With his listening exercises, Prendergast aims to illustrate the importance of counterfactuals in human experience, as integral to our psychological make-up. Perhaps *Counterfactuals: Paths of the Might have Been* will inspire new interest in counterfactual conditionals outside of their current domain. However, anyone so inspired would be well-advised to pursue their interest with more careful treatments of the subject matter.